

In the Specification:

Please delete the paragraph on page 1, lines 22-30, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

A1
Communication networks are known to include a plurality of communication switches interoperably coupled to provide communication links between end users. Such end users are coupled to the communication network via ports associated with the plurality of switches. The users may be individual users such as personal computers, telephones, videophones, ~~fax-simile~~ facsimile machines, etc. The users may also be other network components such as servers, routers, private branch exchanges (PBX), etc. The communication network may also include a network manager that manages the establishment of communication links and overall operation of the communication system.

Please delete the paragraph on page 2, lines 1-14, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

A2
As is known, to establish a communication path between ports of different switches communication links between the endpoint switches and intervening switches need to be established. As is also known, each port within a switch may support multiple communications between users that traverse the same path over one or more links. The communications supported in the network may be virtual connections (VCs), which are also referred to as virtual circuits and which may include virtual path connections (VPCs) and virtual channel connections (VCCs). Each individual virtual connection is identified by a virtual connection identifier (VCI). In order to reduce the amount of state information required to be maintained by intervening switches, paths of the multiple communications supported by a single port may be aggregated to form a virtual path aggregation. Within the virtual path aggregation, each of the virtual connections maintains its own unique identity through the use of its VCI. As such, at the terminating end of the virtual path (VP) aggregation, each of the individual virtual connections (VCs) can be reconstructed based on the VCI included within each cell.

Please delete the paragraph on page 4, lines 14-21, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

A3 The invention can be better understood with reference to Figures 1-5. Figure 1 illustrates a block diagram of a communication system 10 that includes a communication network 12 and local switches 14, 22, and 30. The communication network 12 includes a plurality of switches that are interoperably coupled to provide communication paths between various nodes within the communication network 12, where the nodes are accessible external to the communication network 12. The switches ~~38-48~~ 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, and 48 of the communication network 12 may process data using various protocols, including frame relay protocol, internet protocol (IP), ATM protocol, or any combination thereof.

Please delete the paragraph on page 4, line 28, through page 5, line 7, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

A4 In order to support the virtual connection merging function, a portion of the switches included in the network 10 of Figure 1 include systems that include components illustrated in Figure 2 that permit multiple virtual connections to be merged to form a merged virtual connection. For example, if multiple virtual connections exist within the network 10 that traverse the communication network 12 along a shared path through a portion of the switches ~~38-48~~ 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, and 48, the multiple virtual connections that share this path may be merged prior to traversing the shared portion such that, with regard to the switches along the shared path, only a single virtual connection appears to exist. This reduces the overhead associated with transmitting data through the communication network 12.

Please delete the paragraph on page 7, lines 4-16, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

A5 In a more complex prioritization system, each of the virtual connections 120 has a corresponding class assignment, where the class differentiation may be based on the cost associated with the virtual connection, the type of data traffic carried by the virtual connection, the end user corresponding to the virtual connection, etc. Such differentiation between different classes of service is preferable in communications network such that the needs of a variety of users can be met in an efficient manner. In order to allocate the available bandwidth on the merged virtual connection 142 based on a class system, a number of individual class queues ~~130-134~~ 130, 132, and 134 may be included in the queue that indicates which buffers have complete data packets for transmission. Through the use of the class queues ~~130-134~~ 130, 132, and 134, the bandwidth distribution for the merged virtual connection 142 may be performed based on the class of the various virtual connections

120, whereas, in other embodiments the bandwidth distribution was based on the individual identity of the virtual connection 120.

Please delete the paragraph on page 7, lines 17-25, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

AS In the example illustrated, the virtual connection A is a third class virtual connection (i.e. assigned to the third class), the virtual connection C is a second class virtual connection, and the virtual connections B and D are first class virtual connections. As such, when complete packets for the virtual connection A are buffered in the buffer A 80, the identity of the virtual connection A is included in the third class queue 134. Preferably, each of the class queues ~~130-134~~ 130, 132, and 134 is implemented as a linked list structure such that the addition of the identity of a particular virtual connection to the queue merely requires appending the identity of the virtual connection to a tail of the appropriate linked list. Linked list structures are well known in the art.

Please delete the paragraph on page 12, line 25, through page 13, line 2, of the specification and replace it with the following paragraph:

Ab The buffering block 230 preferably includes a plurality of buffers ~~232-238~~ 232, 234, 236, and 238 where each buffer of the plurality of buffers corresponds to a particular virtual connection. Each of the virtual connections has a unique virtual connection identifier, and each cell for that particular virtual connection as received by the buffering block 230 includes the virtual connection identifier of its corresponding virtual connection. The cells received for each of the plurality of virtual connections are buffered in a corresponding one of the buffers ~~232-238~~ 232, 234, 236, and 238.